

The Burgher and the Villein: rethinking the problem of bullying

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Discussion of the problem of bullying too often relies on 'common sense' notions drawn from three assumptions which could be categorised as myths. This paper attempts to analyse the problem in terms of interactions, drawing on concepts from Simmel and others, in order to reassess the issues and possibilities for taking appropriate action to prevent bullying.

That there is a need to examine the causes and operations of bullying in all its forms has been amply demonstrated by news reports from around the world in the past decade or so. In Britain alone, the appalling murder of ten year old Damilola Taylor represents the high profile end of a number of cases of schoolchildren being stabbed to death by bullying gangs (*Guardian* 29 November 2000); the murder of eight year old Victoria Climbié by her aunt (*Guardian* 24 September 2001) is indicative of extreme bullying abuses in domestic settings; and there are frequent reports of suicides by people like Jermaine Lee, following bullying in the workplace (*Guardian* 9 January 2001). Tim Field's website, which provides help and advice for victims of bullying recorded over 8,000 visits in its first year (1997-8). There can be little doubt that bullying can no longer be dismissed as a minor character-building episode in a person's life, as portrayed by Thomas Hughes in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a century and a half ago.

Yet academic investigation of bullying has been limited. Until recently, the topic has had little interest for educationists or psychologists, the two academic disciplines that one might turn to for enlightenment. Academics with no experience of bullying are unlikely to perceive a need to investigate the problem; those who might have been victims of bullying are perhaps too humiliated or worn down by the experience to be able to apply their minds to it as a generic phenomenon; while those who might have been perpetrators of bullying are unlikely to see it as a problem worthy of academic investigation.

As a result, the analysis of bullying has often been left to superficial explanation and 'common sense' presumption, largely drawing on three major misperceptions from the application of inappropriate psychological theory.

Three myths about bullying.

The first common misperception is that all bullies are 'psychopaths'. This may perhaps provide some slight comfort and reassurance for victims, bewildered at the unjustified and out-of-proportion attacks they have

suffered: their sense of injustice may be somewhat mollified by the use of 'psychopath' as a derogatory term to describe their oppressor(s). But bullying is so commonplace that there would be no hope for society if all bullies were truly psychopaths in the strict sense. It is too easy to credit them with a psychiatric condition which suggests that it is not their fault.

The second misperception is that bullies have low self-esteem. This again is counter-intuitive (cf Emler): bullies certainly play with and undermine the self-esteem of their victims/targets, but frequently display arrogance and self-importance. As with the term 'psychopath', it may be reassuring for the victims to believe that those who bully them are psychiatrically deficient, but the principal problem with bullies is not primarily a psychological one.

The third misperception is that victims invite the bullying because of their own psychological weaknesses. This is the most absurd and least acceptable of all the myths surrounding bullying, and may be explained as an excuse for inaction by those who ought to be concerned, but have no personal experience of the phenomenon and lack empathy with those who do. The fact that this 'common sense' fallacy was proposed in a serious academic conference by the British Psychological Association (*Guardian* 7 Jan 2000) suggests that psychology in its current state has no answer to the problem of bullying.

Simmel and dyadic interaction

If we are to take the investigation of bullying into a more serious domain than the 'common sense' approach, we need tools of analysis which have not been blunted by ignorance, presupposition or lack of interest. A very fundamental tool which we might use as a starting-point is a simple model of social interaction suggested by Freud's contemporary, Georg Simmel (1858-1918). He suggested two principal mechanisms of social interaction, the first of which was the interplay between two individuals, which he referred to as a *dyad*.

One of the main reasons for the misperceptions surrounding the notion of bullying is that we tend to see the interaction between bully and victim as a classic dyadic relationship in which communication takes place between individuals who are listening and responding to each other's signals. A number of early communication theorists represented this dyadic interaction



figure 1: Classic model of 'normal' dyadic interaction

algebraically as between x and y (see figure 1). Shannon and Weaver (1949) drew the analogy between such interaction and that of telecommunication. The participants take it in turns to be *transmitter* and *receiver* in the communication process. Misunderstandings and confusions arise when distractions, such as external sounds or internal thoughts, interfere with the transmission, just as electronic *noise* interferes with electronic signals. Gerbner (1955) restored the human element to this mechanistic analogy, recognising the complexity of human perception. He suggested that the person (x) transmitting the signal (S) already has a *percept* of the event (E) which is described by his or her own conceptual and linguistic knowledge. This signal of the event ($SE1$) passes through a chain of complex mechanisms for encoding and transmitting it to the person (y) receiving the signal. This person interprets the signal through a further chain of decoding mechanisms to form his/her own percept or signal of the event ($SE2$) which will vary from that of the sender according to the distortions encountered and the degree to which they share cultural meanings. Jakobson (1960) noted the plethora of simultaneous signals that arise in any such dyad, taking into account the exchange of non-verbal and subconscious signals as well as the intended 'message'.

These and other theorists were, of course, addressing the notion of communication between individuals. They were seeking a universal theory of 'normal' communication. For that reason, they presupposed an equality of respect and attention, as indicated by the diagrams they present, all of which illustrate the interaction as a lateral relationship. They were not addressing the bullying situation, which is, by definition, a breakdown in 'normal' communications. Likewise, the psychological explanations of bullying tend to presuppose a 'normal' behaviour pattern which is breached by an aberrant encoding or decoding mechanism on the part of one of the actors in the dyadic interaction.

But bullying, whether at school, in the workplace or in a domestic situation, is always based on an assumption by one or both parties that the relationship is *not* of equals. The child who gangs together with other children to make fun of another child does not see his or her relationship with the target of their 'fun' as one of equality. The assumption is that

the target is inferior because of one or more of a range of presenting differences. The target may be of a different race, may wear different clothes, may have a perceptible disability, may speak with a different accent, or may simply be displaying different cultural symbols. The bully draws attention to these differences in order to rally supporters to his/her 'game' of disparagement. The office bully or the domestic bully is in a very similar way presupposing actual or perceived superiority over his/her target. In the workplace, it may be their length of service, appearance or an official role. In the home, it may be gender, age, or an assumed family role. In such situations, the assumed pattern of communication is not a lateral dyad as in figure 1 but a vertical dyad, as illustrated in figure 2.

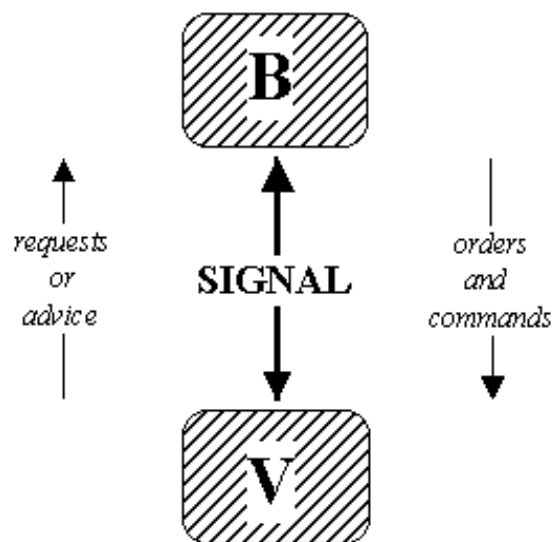


figure 2: vertical dyad in power relationships

The vertical dyad illustrated here enables us to recognise that bullying is not about 'normal' lateral relationships of equality and respect, but about power differentials, assumed or real, in social interaction.

Whatever the real or formal relationship between the parties concerned, the expectation of B is that he or she is the bigwig and V is his or her valet. B's percepts, concepts and linguistic range all reflect an assumption of higher status, transmitted through both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication. The signal received by V is to be interpreted as orders and commands, irrespective of the detail in the overt message (cf Mehrabian, 1971). In turn, V is expected to encode humility in the signals sent back to B, which are interpreted as forms of supplication, either requests for action or, at best, advice which B may choose to accept or ignore. Where, for instance, B is a baron and V his vassal, the power relationship is agreed by both parties, and acted out accordingly. Problems arise when V does not share the assumed vertical dyadic relationship expected by B.

Such a person may appear to B to be 'jumped up', 'too big for their boots', or in need of 'taking down a peg or two'. All these are bullying phrases, and indicate an assumption of superiority on the part of the speaker over the target of his or her disdain. The target has offended the bully's assumption of their respective roles in a power relationship.

This is not only consistent with, but also explains a common observation in empirical studies of the bullying phenomenon (e.g. Field 1996:109ff), that the victims of workplace bullying very rarely conform to the assumed 'common sense' profile of being shy, unpopular or incompetent at their jobs. Such a profile, unthinkingly perpetuated by journalists (e.g. Toynbee 1999), may salve the conscience of those who take no action about bullying, but it leads directly to the sort of poor scholarship and circular argument that blames the victim for the aggression he or she suffers.

A small-scale empirical study

In order to test the hypothesis, a 'straw poll' pilot study was set up, in which those who felt themselves to be victims of workplace bullying were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Time and resources were not available for a thorough statistically based study, and the sample was self-selected, drawn from those who responded to an internet address and a small advertisement in the newsletter of a charity. In spite of its obvious limitations, this initial study provided thirty strong cases, which varied in their complexity, but in all of which the respondent felt him- or herself to have been victimised unfairly. In all cases but one, the victim identified the principal perpetrator as a senior colleague or person in a superordinate role who did not manifest competence. The victim had rarely spoken out about the bully's inadequacies, but simply by being competent and popular posed a perceived threat. The following comment from a female respondent was typical:

"I am generally regarded as a 'strong' personality and funnily enough I know that my manager respected me – and others have also commented how glowingly she used to describe my professionalism and my ability. The 'however' of course is that she found me a threat, and consequently couldn't help but bully me as a matter of routine."

The presenting behaviour pattern of the bully may seem to be evidence of psychosis to individual targets, but the important feature of almost every case when examined in detail is that the bully has a rational purpose, namely that of protecting his or her own income and reputation, even at the expense of other people's. Far from being psychotic, the bully is often coldly rational and calculating. In one case, for example, the perpetrator was overheard describing his activities to a colleague as "office chess". His opponent, or intended victim, had no knowledge that a game was being played, had not set out to play, and had not been briefed about the rules to which they were expected to adhere.

In the majority of the cases uncovered in this study, the perpetrator did not act alone, but in concert with others, either directly or indirectly. The need for observation or participation by third parties is a common but rarely considered feature of the bullying phenomenon. I would go so far as to say that it is an essential ingredient in all forms of bullying, whether in the playground, the workplace or the home.

Tryadic interaction

Simmel's second unit of social interaction is the three-way relationship or *tryad*. (I am deliberately coining a different spelling from the normal "triad", to avoid other connotations and to ensure symmetry with the dyad and polyad.) This is the key concept in his work on interactions, and has been sadly neglected. It is also the key factor in understanding the mechanics and operations of bullying.

The presence of a third party, or *tertius* in Simmel's terms, alters and transforms any dyadic interaction. This is especially and inevitably the case with a dispute. Instead of a classic dyadic interaction as in figure 1, both parties will 'play to the gallery' when a *tertius* is present, either to impress or to invite the third party to adjudicate. In a bullying scenario, the observer plays an even more vital role, as Peter Randall (1997:31) noted:

"Onlookers are important to bullies provided that they do not tell authority figures what is happening. The importance of peer group onlookers to the bully is that they represent an efficient means of spreading the word that this bully is powerful and thereby enhance the power that the bully has."

In the playground, in the home or in the workplace, a bully establishes power and dominance, not just over the immediate victim, but also over other potential targets who bear direct or indirect witness to his or her actions. Figure 3 represents a tryadic relationship where O is an Onlooker in relation to the B-V dyad.

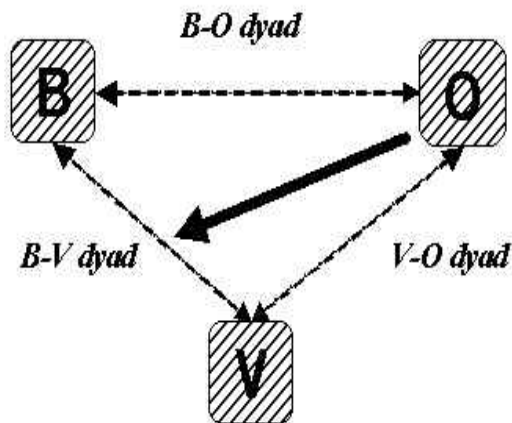


figure 3: the O-B-V tryad with path of critical OBVersion

In such a tryadic relationship, it is important to recognise that both B and V also have dyadic interaction with O, which will influence O's percept of the Event, the B-V dyad, that he or she is witness to. In the case of the 'office chess'-player, as in that of the playground warlord or the domestic bully, there is a consciousness on the part of the bully of the need to impress outsiders, who may be courted with charm or briefed with false rumours about V before the latter knows what is going on. Such consciousness is not shared by the victim, who has generally no idea that he or she has been targetted, until the bullying activities begin. Consequently, the inference drawn by O toward the B-V interaction, (the crucial feature of the O-B-V tryad) is subject to predetermined bias: O is predisposed to obvert the issues according to the face presented to his or her view by B.

Other tryadic relationships in bullying scenarios involve participants rather than observers. There are two principal kinds of participant tertius, namely the protégé or sidekick (S) of B, and the superordinate authority (A), to whom an appeal for judgement may be made by one or other party. Both these kinds differ significantly from the independent neutral observer (O), in that they have an interest vested in the scenario and its outcome.

Participant tryads

In some languages, the English word "bullying" translates as "ragging" or "mobbing" (Leymann) – terms which imply group activity. Indeed, properly to investigate bullying requires not just an understanding of individuals' aggressive tendencies, but, as Andrea Adams pointed out (1992:162):

"It also requires some understanding of group behaviour; how gangs work; what part rumour plays in organisations; the difficulty of establishing the truth in any given situation; and the way in which people attempt to establish alliances"

If we recognise that the Bully is usually in a vertical dyadic relationship with the target or victim, we can see how he or she has an advantage over the latter in attracting followers. As Harry L. Gray has noted (Kakabadse & Parker:116), "Organizational power relates to the perception colleagues have of the ability to promote growth or reward". This applies as much to domestic and playground forms of bullying as in the workplace. The abusing parent's partner, the gang leader's sidekicks, or the Head of Department's favourites, all maintain their silence about the bully's activities in return for the promise of advantage.

While "mobbing" suggests a polyadic relationship, where a group or gang make fun of or physically abuse the target, it is more helpful in understanding what takes place to recognise Simmel's view, that all large-scale interactions can be broken down into tryadic ones for the sake of examining their mechanisms. So if, for instance, a group of workers have 'sent to Coventry' (i.e. refused to talk with) one of their number at the instigation of a bully, each episode is a tryadic interaction, as illustrated in fig. 4.

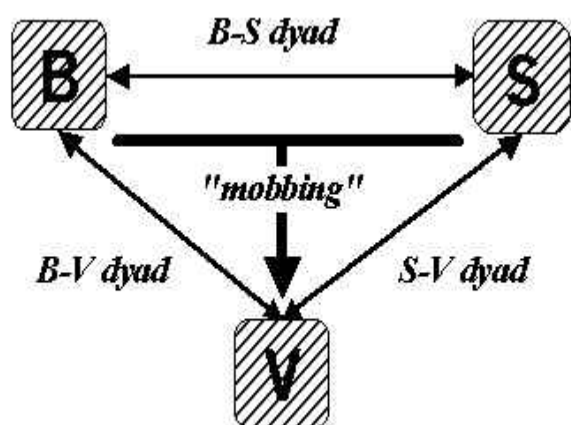


figure 4: the S-B-V tryad, with the path of SuBVersion

Each S has a different dyadic relationship with B, and in turn will receive different rewards from B according to the role he or she is expected to perform in relation to the subversion of V's happiness and self-confidence. The bully is fully aware of, and takes advantage of the complex confusion in organisational relations, which his or her actions exacerbate. According to Neil Crawford,

"Bullies can achieve greater power from the selective associations they make. The study of organisations reveals that they create many unofficial roles for colleagues, including henchmen, spies, lackeys, sycophants or court jester." (in Adams, 1992: 82)

Whatever their specific characteristics, all these sidekicks and protégés have the same value for B, whether a domestic, playground or workplace bully. The third party, or *tertius*, has to make a decision, as Simmel (1950: 155) recognised:

"...the *tertius* makes his own indirect or direct gain by turning toward one of the two conflicting parties - but not intellectually and objectively, like the arbitrator, but practically, supporting or granting."

The support provided by each S is not only as a participant in assisting with the immediate bullying scenario, but also as a witness in any future repercussions, where an authority might be called in to settle a dispute between V and B. Payment might be financial or through promise of promotion, in workplace settings; sexual or emotional in domestic; or simply recognition as a person of significance, an accepted member of the gang, in children's bullying.

Authority and the Linear Triad

When bullying activities get so out of hand that they result in the murder or suicide of the Victim, an autonomic response among the media is very often to question the inaction by authorities responsible for maintaining order. By implication, it is assumed that the relevant officials should be aware of bullying and be taking action to prevent its recurrence.

There are three reasons why a person in authority may fail to take action in cases of bullying. The first is that they are too busy to bother with what they perceive as minor matters. The second is that under-managers are paid to deal with such issues. And the third is that to take action might well disrupt the organisation. Andrea Adams (1992:162-3) identified all three:

"An overall principal may have fifteen or twenty departments to manage, and depends on individual heads to run them. All that may concern these people is that everything is going well... If the principal backs

a more junior member of staff, they will risk not only undermining the authority of the head of department, but also a complete breakdown in relations."

The result for workplace bullying, Adams continues, is that "a person in charge can continue to rule their fiefdom, and bully their staff, with apparent impunity." In the case of bullying among schoolchildren, the same pressures apply to head-teachers. In domestic bullying, the social services and police have the added difficulty of having to decide who is responsible, when to intervene and the level of intervention that would be appropriate.

Before we become too beguiled by the difficulties facing the Authority in charge, however, we should remember that there are a great many head teachers, company principals and social service bosses who run organisations where bullying is rare, and who successfully take action when it does arise. Why should one school have a reputation for bullying and another be considered safe?

The answer is not the catchment area. Good and bad schools, as other institutions, can be found everywhere, irrespective of the advantages or otherwise of the local inhabitants. A more positive answer is that the Authority already has an extraordinarily difficult task in sorting out whether a Victim is telling the truth. Bullies are notorious for their ability to switch from appearing "sincere and charming" to being "aggressive and threatening" in accordance with who is present (Field, 1996:199). Because they are more than usually conscious of power relations, bullies ensure that their aggressive side is well hidden from their superiors.

The less positive answer is that it is the management style, ethos or culture by which an organisation is run that determines whether a school or any other institution is successful or otherwise in controlling bullying. In a successful institution, there is usually openness and transparency in its operation, and all share the same purpose. In institutions where bullying is rife, there is usually a culture of secrecy and cover-up, with lines of communication between the principal and the complainant being blocked.

This is illustrated in figure 5. In an operational context of control, or what Handy (1993:183-4) calls a 'power culture', the complainant, V, has no access to the authority, A, except through a 'line manager', B. This places B in a convenient position to select what goes forward and what is filed in the waste bin. If interactions between V and B have broken down, there is no path of complaint open to V. Moreover, B is likely already to have access to A in routine meetings and networking, and will have given a

suitable impression of charm. Probably the first time that A has any direct contact with V will be through the latter's making some official complaint, and thus identifying him- or herself as a 'trouble-maker'. A's priorities in a power culture are stability and team cohesion, as Goffman recognised:

"In authoritarian organizations, where a team of superordinates maintains a show of being right every time and of possessing a united front, there is often a strict rule that one superordinate must not show hostility or disrespect toward any other superordinate while in the presence of a member of the subordinate team." (Goffman, 1959:78)

In workplace and domestic bullying, B is often able to manipulate A's view by attribution error. This is the tendency to attribute cause to individuals rather than the situations in which they find themselves (Hinton: 149). B sways the judgement of A by misuse of the actor-observer effect (Hinton: 150), attributing V's behaviour and complaints, not to an external cause such as the stress which B's actions

imposed, but to the weaknesses of V's personal attributes.

In playground bullying, V is usually represented to authority by an irate parent, and, if the issues are not dealt with by the school, the case may escalate to the local authority. If school and local authority are run in the manner of a control culture, the same mechanism may apply. In a recent example in London, a mother withdrew her son from a school where he had been threatened by a gang of bullies wielding knives, because the school refused to recognise the problem. Instead of remedying the situation by transferring the child, the local authority proceeded to prosecute the mother for keeping the child away from school. In two highly stressful court hearings, the mother was praised by the magistrate as the only person concerned with the welfare of her son, and fully exonerated by an appeal judge. Eventually, after a year had passed with the child receiving no formal education, the local authority at last offered the mother a place for him at another school, one where, the month before, a child had been stabbed to death by a gang of bullies wielding knives!

The Burgher and the Villein

By analysing the mechanisms of bullying using the tools suggested by Simmel, we can now address the three myths about bullying identified previously. We can replace them with three principles:

1. Bullies are playing power games, in which they maintain their power differential by bullying those whose skills and abilities hold potential threats to their status. The studious child, the caring partner, the popular teacher, all are potential targets of victimisation. Occasionally a bully may indeed be a psychopath, but most bullies do not suffer from psychiatric disorder any more than a burglar or a thief.
2. Bullies do not lack self-esteem, but attack the self-esteem of their targets in order to neutralise their potential to threaten the bully's own position. Bullies do not have low self-esteem but high self-interest.
3. Victims of bullying are no more to blame than victims of any recognised criminal activity.

So how can the study of – and, more importantly, the remedy for – the problem of bullying be advanced by this analysis? As a starting point, we have recognised that the problem is not one that can be solved through abstract psychological theory but requires empirical examination of societal behaviour. The dyadic relationship between B and V, and their triadic relationships with a variety of third parties, involves hierarchies of power which bear no necessary relation to their relative intellectual, educational or emotional status. Bullying is invariably instigated by B in order to pre-empt a perceived threat

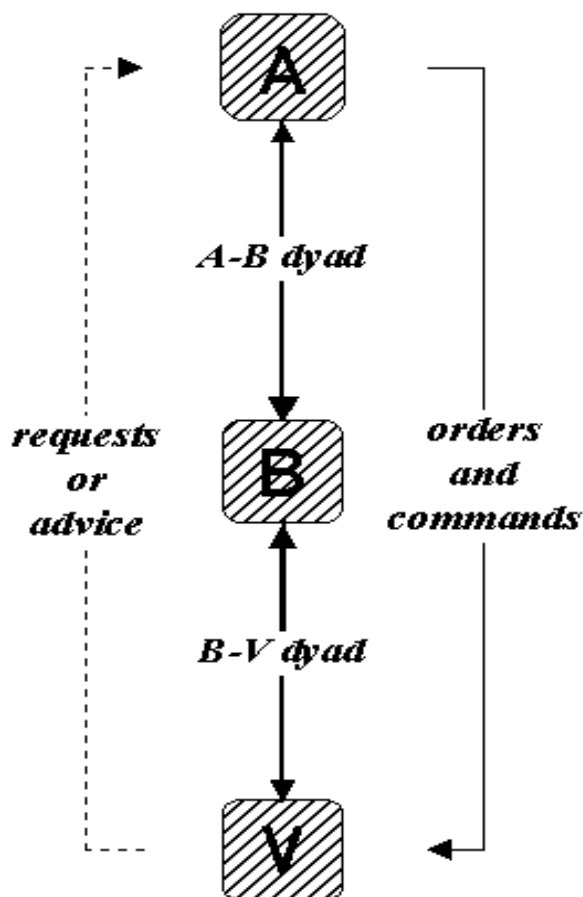


figure 5: the A-B-V linear triad in power cultures

from V which might remove the social or financial advantages B has previously enjoyed before perceiving this threat.

The causes of bullying behaviour may be analogous with sibling rivalry, as Maslow suggests in relation to much 'evil' human behaviour:

"Behaviour that our culture calls evil can also come from ignorance and from childish misinterpretations and beliefs... For instance, sibling rivalry is traceable to the child's wish for the exclusive love of his parents. Only as he matures is he in principle capable of learning that his mother's love for a sibling is compatible with her continued love for him. Thus, out of a childish version of love, not in itself reprehensible, can come unloving behaviour." (Maslow 1999:216-7)

The bully, like the racist thug or habitual abuser, does not subscribe to the need for conventional conversational constraints in his or her dealings with the victim. Min-Sun Kim describes three such constraints as concern for clarity; concern to avoid hurting the hearer's feelings; and concern for minimising imposition (in Wiseman: 151-153). The Bully has released him- or herself from such constraints without telling the Victim, who maintains the expected interactional behaviour and is consequently confused and disorientated.

What bullies have in common is that they have acquired a status within their own social order: the leader of a gang, maybe; the dominant person in a household; the head of a section in an organisation. They enjoy privileges from this status, akin to the historical privileges of citizenship afforded to the burgher, yeoman or freeman over the common peasant. Their relationship to their target or victim derives from the latter's assumed lower social status as that of the villein, serf or bondsman, who is not to be accorded the same rights and privileges.

The problem of bullying is fundamentally the same as the problem of racism or the problem of sexism. Any social interaction in which rights and privileges are granted to one human being (the Burgher) and denied to those whose talents and abilities are no less (the Villein) is iniquitous and a recipe for social disquiet.

The solution is threefold. Firstly, in the immediate term, responsible authorities must wake up to their obligations, and begin to treat victims and their families with respect and empathy. Secondly, we must begin to make and enforce rules such that bullying becomes as legally and socially unacceptable as sexism, racism and bear-baiting in the twenty-first

century. Thirdly, in the long run, the education of our children should be directed toward enabling all to be fulfilled according to their own talents and skills, and to recognise differences in others as celebratory rather than threatening.

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